

Advisor: Dr. Noelle Morrisette, Lecturer: Post-1800 English Literature / The Harlem Renaissance

Zora Neale Hurston

**A Universal Voice Far Removed From the
Orgasms of Harlem**

by
Fred Canada

Zora Neale Hurston: A Universal Voice Far Removed From the Orgasms of Harlem

Black art in the 20th century, then, is a pivotal arena in which to chart worries about 'political correctness.' The burden of representing 'the race' in accordance with explicitly political programs can have a devastating impact on black creativity.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: Why the Mule Bone Debate Goes On

Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion.

Zora Neale Hurston: Their Eyes Were Watching God

In recent years, knowingly having had my confidence increased in gender scholarship, I find myself prepared to argue against Carla Kaplan's position that "reduced to its basic narrative component, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God is a story of a young woman in search of an orgasm" (Kaplan 99). To even state such a preposterous notion undermines how well Hurston's anthropological acumen took issue with the setting(s) she placed her protagonist in. Hurston understood her intentions well. Hurston knew she wanted her black female bodies independent of the colonial rites that once enslaved them of their sensuous liberties. On the contrary, the sexual liberation of black bodies and souls, not sex itself, is at the core of the narrative and cultural components in Hurston's novel, and the merging of that "double self into a better and truer self" (DuBois 3) is at the epicenter of Hurston's mission to discover the voices of herself, Janie, and God.

So, let us explore the dimensions of Kaplan's desire for a "cultural conversation." Within Janie Crawford's coming-of-age journey through the swamps of Florida comes an astute underpinning of an awaking, if not an emancipation, from the slave-narratives and an unavoidable burst into a post-colonial, even painful processing toward modernity, and its inevitable literary

endowment of the black women's sexual autonomy as an American woman. Thus, what I find to be at the crux of Hurston's search of self; that is, through the "revelation" of Janie's search of self, and that entity of being passionately engulfed in her quest for survival, is that she simply desires *belonging*: a part of a "belonging" which makes her quest for love and power a plausible entity of *sexual* connectedness, inasmuch as to be connected to the appropriate partner, the appropriate culture, the appropriate race, the appropriate God, as well as to the appropriate society therewith. Hurston evokes in her protagonist a challenge universal to all woman- and mankind. Whether it is self-conscious or not, before Janie learns the power of words, and just how stark her wisdom is, her sexuality is her only *carte blanche* she feels she owns.

Foucault observes:

Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the great instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies. (*The History of Sexuality* 103)

During the intervals when Janie is in control of her *instrumentation*—whether it is innate or not—Janie comprehends this urgency of purpose: to be "endowed" with a sexual empowerment that might protect her from men who are overbearing and cruel to her. In their Southern rural existence, Black men are subordinates to the *rule of law* in Hurston's narrative and it is only upon their own dark communities that they are able to act out their frustration authoritatively; and, even then, while policed by the instruments of heteronormativity, all too often, it becomes a violent "instrumentality" aimed against Black women. Without any hesitation, Hurston takes us inside her world, no, our world, with nearly inexplicably impeccable details of humor and pain,

and evinces how brutal life in the trenches of ethnic America is. Yet, within the ironic compounds of the Negro community itself, Hurston impinges upon readers just how plausible sexism, racism, and domestic violence co-exist amidst blacks in America. For example, no sooner than three to four chapters after Tea Cake has plotted and pleaded for Janie's love, stating at the end of Chapter 11 that "*baby...You got de keys to de kingdom...*" he's slapping Janie's face if but to "relieve that awful fear [of jealousy and post-colonial suppression that exists...] inside him" (147). Arguably, Janie's silence *signifies* her strength; yet, Janie will only accept this continuum of aggression from Tea Cake with limited recurrences; and the epiphany of Tea Cake's existence lies in his being the "linchpin" for Hurston's timely, post-colonial depiction of violence in America. Diane Miles's statement seems supportive of this observation too:

One of the most distinguishing aspects of Hurston's work is that it gives testimony to a cultural trauma that makes victimization a part of everyday African American experience. The perpetuity of the trauma that Hurston addresses places the victim's experience within the range of ordinary experience. Hurston addresses the personal and cultural trauma that results from living in a *perpetually* violent world while *continually* bearing the "dead-weight of social degradation and gender discrimination. (21)

Also striking is how the self-absorbed Mrs. Turner is viewed with both domestic and universal significance. Again, Tea Cake's character enables the display of the animosities that exist among blacks, in particular because of this race's diversity of skin tone. Though Tea Cake does not make a direct assault on Mrs. Turner's skin color, he is highly critical of her bright, nearly *white*-passing body: (*Passing* is the epitome of *that* other ubiquitous theme established among women writers of the *Negro Renaissance*):

Mrs. Turner was a milky sort of a woman that belonged to child-bed. Her shoulders rounded a little, and she must have been conscious of her pelvis because she kept it stuck out in front of her so she could always see it. Tea Cake made a lot of fun about Mrs. Turner's shape behind her back. He claimed that she had been shaped up by a cow kicking her from behind....

But Mrs. Turner's shape and features were entirely approved by Mrs. Turner. Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her thin lips were an ever delight to her eyes. Even her buttocks in bas-relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking all these things set her aside from Negroes. That was why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie's coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields. (Hurston 139-140)

Here we are reinforced with the notion that Janie's "coffee-and-cream complexion," or as the Negro while amongst one another might add, high-yellow complexion, endows Janie being in Mrs. Turner's company. Now a subtle but potent commentary on biases within the race itself arrives (then too, in this same passage, Hurston informs the reader that Mrs. Turner's "disfavorite subject was Negroes"), as we learn how racist Mrs. Turner is:

She didn't forgive her for marrying a man as dark as Tea Cake, but she felt that she could remedy that. That was what her brother was born for.
(Hurston 140)

(I find Hurston's voice—her "double-voiced" interpretation of the Negro, as I will note later as to how Gates explains Hurston's psychological acumen toward African American folklore—in that aforesaid sentence, to be particularly priceless to students of American Studies,

especially to foreigners studying American Literature. It defines the bigotry among the Negro and it establishes, through “their eyes,” just how widespread prejudices are amongst African Americans toward one another.) In this profundity alone one sees how this novel is not at its core a mere venture of orgasms. Hurston’s wisdom here offers an historical adage to our past as well as a conscientiousness of what barriers we need to overcome to be empowered with a plausible solidarity and morality in any application of nation-building. It is a novel about power, prejudice, principles, and privilege; issues that are universal, and issues that are at the cornerstone of one’s discovery of their -national- identity, within a race and nation coming of age in the context of Modernism.

Still Kaplan’s provocation has me questioning is it not true that in every-other-great literary work that has taunted mankind from the Middle Ages to Modernity, there exists, at the core of these works, an indebtedness to the sexual *instrumentality* of those characters—insofar as to name but a few—such as Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Goethe, George Bernard Shaw, Harriet Jacobs, Stowe, Irving, Hawthorne, Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Alice Walker, Margret Atwood, Christa Wolf, Henry Miller, Toni Morison, Anne Rice, Hemingway, Oates, O’Connor, Hardy, Tolstoy, Austin, James, The Brontës, and Roth? As Oscar Wilde simplifies it, “Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power.” And has it not always been palpably acceptable that an author’s sexual identity and sexual growth was at the core of their characters’ coming of age? So why should one not accept this simplicity of misconceptions on Kaplan’s behalf? Because the social-political burdens placed on Hurston and the rest of the Harlem Renaissance writers were far more complex than one author’s orgasm erupting out of the subways of 125th Street. Albeit Kaplan makes a stark observation, that one’s erotic nature is quite an innate and acceptable human trait, since it is the “oldest [of] human

longing,” unfortunately, one need not be a genius to understand how it is clear that Kaplan’s position in her essay “‘The Oldest Human Longing’: The Erotics of Talk in Their Eyes Were Watching God,” is mused by that reputed discourse—whereby Kaplan might herself desire to belong to that *continually bearing [of] the dead-weight of social degradation* (Du Bois 8)—those Black males who were, also, coerced into the white male-dominated publishing world, and the white representation of authority in the Harlem Renaissance at that time, were prone to subscribe to. It is well-documented, secretively amidst themselves, that many Black male authors felt threaten by the popular presence of writers such as Nella Larson, Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston.

Thereupon, it is with a greater degree of respect, in the realm of Hurston’s creative and intellectual prowess, that I proffer *this* defense for Hurston’s work and demand a far more intellectual insightfulness than that which Kaplan has imposed upon the prose and letters of Hurston; for Hurston isn’t only conscious of Janie’s sufferings...as a silenced woman seeking “to find a voice.” Just as Kaplan has postulated with Gates’ example of Janie’s being there for the black woman’s “coming of consciousness” (*Their Eyes* / Afterword 196), Janie’s quest is to grow, to attain that tree of knowledge and grow as a being, and be a being who can belong and not just be some young girl sitting, isolated, on a fence, gazing at cars, filled with “out-of-townners” passing by (Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”). Indeed, through *the eyes* of Hurston, Janie longs “to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom” (Hurston 11)! And, Hurston understands, seeing Janie bloom is seeing Janie grow [*Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the (her) world to be made.*], and not just growing inwardly inasmuch as acquiring her sexual divinities of lust and orgasms. She wants “to struggle with life” and struggle with a life that will not become elusive, Hurston notes. I would even concur that Hurston’s

passion, in realm of Janie's lust, reaches for a fullness that is too sensuous for most men—even beyond Kaplan's ethnically detached hindsight—to comprehend. Janie's actions are feminine: though perhaps Kaplan supports the notion of most white men “who would police the political effects of black art”¹—that it would even appear bewitching: with black women “kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world” (11).

Janie longs for a life that is in reach of her own compelling destiny, not one that is at the helm of another's decision-making consequence, like as from that “beginning” which she has had to experience as a result of her mother handing her over to Logan Killicks. Had she had the chance to develop her sexuality from the onset with a “trashy nigger” like Johnny Taylor, Janie might have learnt from the *school of hard knocks* a lesson that would have made her far more cautious in all her sexual endeavors. Then, too, not to miss an essential point that Hurston is making here, she does imply how risky it is for any woman to be under the bondage of marriage at too early an age.

For an African American female, in this *new era of freedom*, sixteen is extremely young; and Hurston copes with informing her readers of the tragedy of such ill-prepared decisions at such an early age. At sixteen, Janie is just discovering who she is in relation to her community. She has only just begun to find herself in an all-black township in Eatonville, Florida, feasibly existing to others outside its domain as the “Darktown” project, where her environment is an exceptional and new spiritual and moral hub for the black entrepreneur. It is a community where investing in freedom is a new lifestyle which her slave-born grandmother—raising her over the years and possibly having vented Janie as a texture of that era—is certainly eschewed about supporting Janie to parade about so freely and *single* in the new world order of such a risk-

¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Why the Mule Bone Debate Goes On,” *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co.), p. 227.

taking society. Why would Janie think of marrying someone at sixteen; even if she has been intrigued with Johnny Taylor's flirtations? She isn't taking up the notion of marrying anyone! "Who Ah'm goin' tuh marry off-hand lak dat? Ah don't know nobody" (Hurston 13). She isn't at all ready for such responsibility. She's yet found her place within the commune of others, better yet to find herself in society. Why should she now suddenly oblige herself to such a sacred contract as marriage? And of all things, she's forced to be with someone who looks "like some ole skull head in de grave yard" (Hurston 13). Within such superb symbolism and truth, one should feel this urgency to stand up against Kaplan, stating how Death is as potent a metaphor as Orgasms are in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

II

When Walker's Eyes were "Looking for Zora": The Lie Which Brought about a Rediscovery of Zora

Like Zora Neale Hurston has done in giving birth to Janie Crawford, Alice Walker has taught those interested in Hurston's fate that good lies are plausible lies. Herewith my discovery of Hurston, within this academic framework, I feel it is appropriate to give praise to Walker's obsession with Zora Neale Hurston. Perhaps it is safe to note that Walker understands Hurston as well as any American literary critic or author does. And she understands Hurston as if she *really* were Hurston's niece. It is not only that Janie shares literary kinship with Celie of Alice Walker's The Color Purple, whose eyes not only watch God, but whose words and letters, whose voice, speak directly to God..." (Their Eyes Were Watching God, Danticat, xviii). Furthermore, I would go so far as to suggest that Janie is every bit as prevalent as being Walker's Wangero, a.k.a. Dee, in "Everyday Use."

At the early stages of Walker's "Everyday Use," the influence of Hurston is profusely sharpened within the short story; that is, while Dee and Asalamalakim approach the poor tin-house-dwelling she grew up in, Walker even gives the reader this visage that suggests God is watching her protagonist:

It is hard to see them clearly through the strong sun. But even the first glimpse of leg out of the car tells me it is Dee. Her feet were always neat-looking, as if God himself had shaped them with a certain style. From the other side of the car comes a short, stocky man. Hair is all over his head a foot long and hanging from his chin like kinky mule tail.
(Everyday Use 5)

Arguably, not only is this a splendid metaphorical reference to Jesus, especially here in the hair hanging a foot long, the passage itself with its "mule," is both Hurstonian and Biblical. As the mother describes Maggie's sister Dee, and Dee's free-will and ambitious nature at the beginning of this short story, "her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that 'no' is a word the world never learned to say to her." Like Janie, Walker's Dee wants to belong, yet cannot belong in a world where women co-exist with men who cannot say "no" to them. Their freedom is also their vice. This limitation in the public sphere is in itself the reality of their hardship as women. Hurston makes this no less prominent than when evincing the friction Janie encounters in Joe Starks' brutal presence. "So gradually, she [presses] her teeth together and [learns] to hush" (Hurston 71). While women must cast themselves into such a world that views them as unequal and inferior, remains the greatest challenge facing women. Yet, Dee's partner, Asalamalakim, is free because Dee is free. Simone de Beauvoir postulates, "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (Ethic of Ambiguity 47). Likewise, of all the men in her life, it is only

Tea Cake who allows Janie the space she needs to liberate herself; and although she has to kill the very man she loves most in self-defense, because a mad dog has infected him with rabies, still, it is in the realm of her relationship with Tea Cake, a younger man paving the way of the future, that she is liberated as a woman and human being. Perhaps Richard Wright had a valid argument when he suggested Hurston's novel is weakened by a "facile sensuality" which hurts black writers (Critical Essays 76). However, Wright goes on to suggest that she:

...*voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.

Turpin's faults as a writer are those of an honest man trying desperately to say something; but Zora Neale Hurston lacks even that excuse. The sensory seep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. (Critical Essays 76)

Of course, in lieu of understanding Wright's desire for procuring the "great African American protest novel," it is in this last sentence that I would disagree with Wright and Kaplan, extensively. Again, as I mentioned in the onset of this writing, Hurston's message takes on another gender-mind-set of ambitions exquisitely differing from that of males and this aim is telling the story of a woman trying to empower herself in a society that does not care to see her empowered, and, that includes, her braking heteronormal barriers that encourage women to belong as mere sex objects, and remain inferior under the realm of male sovereignty. One has to

become degendered in their sensibilities to comprehend, intellectually speaking, that there is more than an *orbit of sensuality* and “first degree murder” looming in the Southern vernacular of Hurston’s voice. Take for instance when Hurston’s males accept the notion, “Yeah, de nigger women kin kill up all de mens dey wants tuh, but you bet’ not kill one uh dem. De white folks will sho hang yuh if yuh do” (Hurston 189). Whose side is she on here? How significant are her two souls here, in particular under DuBois’ influence!

Accordingly to Gates, via a sentence from Ntozake Shange, this is the Hurston language which “always made black people nervous...that [self] we know about that makes it too dangerous to say it in public” (Critical Essays 226). Getting beyond the *reins of political correctness*, when one breaks this sentence down into its metaphorical context, perhaps one cannot find a more profound commentary on social *injustice* in America than this. How profound a truth might it be until this day? For example, if one just thinks about the laws that address, challenge, and destroy black men inside the conundrum of child support courts in America nowadays, isn’t Hurston’s political acumen plausible? And no matter how subversively subtle such sentences are, this is implicitly political writing, writing Wright refused to acknowledge was potentially “explicitly political” matter—both in American and abroad—, for post-colonial oppression is global!

III

On Mason’s Sponsorship

It is quite apparent in “Afterward: Looking for Zora” that Alice Walker cherishes Hemenway’s infallible biography on Hurston and she extends, through his words an even deeper, spiritually replenishing correlation for Hurston’s existence. Subsequently, Walker seems to

understand this *quest for liberation and freedom* Hurston desires. And Hurston understood that if men [or women] could not govern, they could not be free (*Moses of the Mountain* 285). Walker quotes Robert E. Hemenway's giving his blessings that the marriage was as brief as it was:

One cannot overemphasize the extent of her commitment. It was so great that her marriage in the spring of 1927 to Herbert Sheen was short-lived. Although divorce did not come officially until 1931, the two separated amicably after only a few months, Hurston to continue her collecting [life-engaging experiences and anthropological artifacts], Sheen to attend Medical School. (Walker 304)

In lashing out against the sponsorship Mrs. R. Osgood Mason provided Hurston with, is an opportunity for another argument Walker takes sides with Hemenway on. She underlines that “The entire relationship between this woman [Mason] and the Harlem Renaissance deserves extended study, for it represents much of the ambiguity involved in white patronage of black artists.” Mason, a.k.a. Charlotte Louise Quick, while being one leading patrons of the Harlem Renaissance, was adamant about advancing the authors careers she endowed; but her sponsorship is said to have come with a price from those writers she supported respecting and underlining her socio-political expectations. (Scholars are only now at the ebb of seeing those expectations become available in print.) Moreover, even though black writers were published, ironically, one has had to keep in mind that this representation—especially during the interim known as The Harlem Renaissance—was being predominately run by publishing houses under white male leadership and censorship.

Sure, it is important to witness life, to experience life, and to absorb what all is there in life that reveals itself unto others; but to have listeners, in particular, “hungry listeners,” is as

essential a dividend to *one's* life as is the revelation of *surviving* to tell one's tale. Even if Janie is “violently silenced by others” (Kaplan 103), she is able, still, to overcome her silence. She's able to become recognized. She's able to become visible; and, even, informative. What Kaplan does not seem to understand is how she herself has agreeably argued with this essential point, which I see so clearly, represents the core of Hurston's argument; an orgasm is far less important than simply belonging; that is, to be loved and respected as a human being is a poignant essential in one's *living* life. Kaplan notes, further:

This orientation toward the listener also characterizes what narrative theorists often describe as the ‘motor’ or motivating force of storytelling, the drive, as Peter Brooks puts it, ‘to be heard, recognized, understood,’ to meet, in Charles Taylor's terms, the ‘vital human need for recognition.’ (102)

It is noteworthy to paraphrase Brooks' findings in his masterpiece The Empty Space. The actor must understand their “ritual” space and the *sensuality* which isolation in that space provokes. With this example lies the stark representation of Hurston's sexual acumen, it is Janie's sensuality, not her sexuality that Hurston has emphasized in lieu of defining Janie's persona within a specific culture rather than primarily through [her] relationship with whites (Wall 65). Though Kaplan's book evinces an incomparable literary acumen apropos of black literature, it is herein, in the realm of her privacy, in sharing her “erotic talk,” that Janie is being misrepresented and misunderstood by Kaplan. To expose her privacy, her *experience* to Pheoby, this not only gives Janie a greater sense of womanhood, or even sisterhood (...in Cheryl Wall's words...), it gives her a “social identity.” [It is] “...the time for sitting on porches beside the road.” To reflect and make “judgment” (Hurston 1).

All the same, like so many others rediscovering Hurston's work, I know a decade from now, I will remember, vividly, the flooding of a region in Florida and two lives struggling to hang on to the tail of a cow while attempting to survive a hurricane. I will remember how taunting nature itself was and how astute Hurston was in describing the wrath of God and Mother Nature in one line: "Havoc was there with her mouth wide open" (167). A remembrance to such stark imagery ironically underpins great story-telling, not "exotic talk" and lies being exchanged in the sequence of lust shared between two lovers lying in bed.

I recall when Allen Ginsberg came to Germany and read with John Ashbery and Amiri Baraka in the winter of 1983. Ginsberg told the audience—who were a packed-house of two-thousand inside the Akademie der Künste—how *hip hop had prompted a new generation of readers who were interested in his poetry*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. noted in the *Afterword* of Their Eyes Were Watching God that "the excavation of her buried life helped a new generation read Hurston again." Albeit Walker's discovery has made it clear that Zora wasn't starving and dying of malnutrition, how tragic is it -still- that this superb author spent her last years on unemployment benefits, substitute teaching, and welfare checks. That Zora "lived a difficult life—alone, proud, ill, obsessed with a book she could not finish" (Hurston / Gates 205), makes room for an inexplicable tragedy of sorts. Still I find it hard not to escape the notion that Hurston longed to feel *beloved and belonged*. It is only human nature to feel this way. The artist does not produce art to *not* be recognized, loved, and appreciated. As a playwright I can assert the notion that she must've been, at least, surreptitiously disappointed that her "fallout" with Langston Hughes had halted the staging of their potentially emancipating production of "Mule Bone." To finally have had her voice(s) heard on the New York City stage, might have meant that her Southern verna-

cular theatrical masterpiece would have surely caused the buzz she would've wanted to have had corroborated all across America.

In referencing to Hurston's "Dust Tracks," Gates sums up best how perplexed that representation of Hurston's voice in its entirety is:

Hurston uses the two voices in her text to celebrate the psychological fragmentation both of modernity and of the black American. As Barbara Johnson has written, hers is a rhetoric of division, rather than a fiction of psychological or cultural unity. Zora Neale Hurston, the 'real' Zora Neale Hurston that we long to locate in this text, dwells in the silence that separates these two voices: she is both, and neither; bilingual, and mute. This strategy helps to explain her attraction to so many contemporary critics and writers, who can turn to her works again and again only to be startled at her remarkable artistry. (Hurston /Afterword 204)

IV

On The Lecturing of a Classic

I dare add....maybe decades from now Hurston will have "exclusive privileges" (see, in the introduction to The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man, Morrisette, p. xxx—xxxi) and will be mentioned beyond the discourse of the "Negro Renaissance" she so starkly supported. This is not said in support of Schuyler's reasoning that "Negro Art 'made in America' is non-existent." However, ironically, it is perhaps there in Gates' aforementioned text of her "remarkable artistry" that Hurston may escape any direct association to the Harlem Renaissance because her voice is *truly* universal. Professor Morrisette underpins in her lectures that *Hurston is reflecting on anthropology without [references to] criminology. Her killing of Tea Cake was*

no crime. It was in self-defense that Janie “reconstructs” her fate and puts her voice into a league of its own. Defending Janie and explaining how one might kill a man poisoned by rabies, Hurston writes, “He had to die to get rid of the dog. But she hadn’t wanted to kill him. A man is up against a hard game when he must die to beat it” (Hurston 187). It is a voice without remorse; but a voice that wasn’t without love: “The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall” (193). I dare to believe that Hurston (not Janie) has given her community, in her own subversive sense of law and order, this *execution* in response to that jeopardy of domestic violence which surrounds her environ. Here, Hurston “governs” and brings liberation to both Janie and her voice as women, and it is one of the essential examples where Hurston’s “double voice” and hindsight reign superior.

Kaplan says it all in bringing Hazel Carby’s insight into her argument, “Racist sexual ideologies proclaimed the black woman to be a rampant sexual being, and in response black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displace sexuality onto another terrain. By insisting on Janie’s right to erotic pleasure, Hurston takes on this complex politics of sexuality” (108). Remember, I have implied, that in the post-Foucauldian *politics of sexuality*, one seems willing to “die for sex.” But, this is the politics of sexuality, not the *Kultur Mechanismus* of the orgasms that is powerfully universal herein; and this is what makes great literature even greater. But here is where the roadblock recurs for the black artist as cultural critic: to repeat and lengthen Gate’s position in the aforementioned epithets stated at the very beginning of this paper:

The burden of representing ‘the race’ in accordance with explicitly political programs can have a devastating impact on black creativity. Perhaps only black musicians and their music, until rap arose, have escaped this problem, because so much of what they composed was

in non-verbal forms and because historically black music existed primarily for a black market. Categorized that way, it [escapes] the gaze of white Americans who, paradoxically, are the principle concern of those who would police the political effects of black art. (Critical Essays 227)

Within the linchpin of Gates' wise words about the pressures surrounding black artists, we might surmise that Wright—limited in his theoretical [classroom] skill-sets of English literature—just did not get it. Or could it have been that Richard Wright, Otis Ferguson,² and other African American males in that era empowered themselves into the position of “policing” and controlling Hurston, and attributed to cultivating a “devastating impact” on Hurston’s creativity and success as a woman? Today, however, Hurston succeeds as anthropologist and social critique, and unlike Jean Toomer she is the one writer in the forefront capable of overshadowing the ethnical “restraints” of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston is merging (has merged!) the (post) colonial slave narrative (swamped in all its fear and violence) to the post-modern (themes of) angst and suicide. She is “deconstructing the literary discourse of the era” (Noelle Morrisette, lecture: 9/10/2014). Hurston’s reconstructing the vernacular discourse of the South and in doing so Hurston discovers that her orgasms do not become the core of this discourse but that Janie’s orgasms act as the universal discourse unto all women and men reading a great American novel.

Although Alice Walker confirms Hurston’s family had nothing to do with her following her respite from Eatonville, Florida, there are newer generations who claim Hurston as family now.

² Perhaps the reader(s) will take the time to read his harsh review on Hurston’s novel, “You Can’t Hear Their Voices.”

One should readily admit that her accolades in Europe far exceed the attention she has been granted here in the States. Abroad, Janie Crawford has become that iconic ire representing the strength of black women in America.

Zora Neale Hurston was one of three American authors I discovered abroad.³ It was not until I got acquainted with German students at the Free University's JFK Institute of American Studies that I learned to appreciate Hurston's novel. Though I knew the story as if it were a part of my body, I procrastinated reading it until my arrival into Professor Morrisette's Harlem Renaissance lectures. Not even had two years at Howard University, immersed within the ethereal legacy of Sterling Brown, prepared me for Hurston's book as favorably as being around those German scholars had. I remember constantly asking myself for two decades, "How could *one* darn book give a writer so much clout?" I would go as far as to state that Zora Neale Hurston's European legacy, in particular, among the academia, is now of a favorable consequent if but because of three Germans presently lecturing in the Afro-American Studies divisions at Freiberg, Bonn, and Heidelberg; and I feel certain that Hurston's legacy is also growing among young scholars at those American Studies departments because of the devotion given to Hurston and other black authors that Renate Semler⁴ (via her cultural attaché position at the Amerika Haus in West Berlin) and Dr. Heine Ickstadt (at Berlin's Free University) established simultaneously in the 70s and 80s. And, thus, three leading German professors—to name but a few—such as Dr. Sieglinde Lemke (Freiberg), Dr. Sabine Sielke (Bonn) and Dr. Simon Wendt (Heidelberg) have carried out this commitment as a result of the two former aforesaid names', that is, Ms. Semler and Dr. Ickstadt, for being the enthusiasts supporting Hurston's accomplishments as they did.

³ Henry Miller and Nathaniel Hawthorne were the other two.

⁴ Renate Semler, a close friend of Gunter Grass, received a Masters in American Studies and English Literature from Duke University.

V

Epilogue

Arguably till this day, a majority of English professors believe one should never read Dante or Chaucer outside the confines of academic corridors; they are authors one gains the essential essence of their writing when they are read and dissected and brainstormed inside the classroom; certain texts need scholarly guidance within the classroom; I would argue that this is the opportunity that Wright missed out on; and perhaps it is indeed that new influx of American and German scholars who are teaching the world Their Eyes Were Watching God is one such text. Having stated this, with nothing but accolades for what Semler and Ickstadt established in West Berlin, under a professor's scholarly leadership, Hurston gives readers a wisdom which not even the best of the world's journeymen as evinced in Hesse's *Siddhartha* (with his streams of humming voices), or Melville's Ahab (with "a certain morbidness," striking the skull of Moby Dick), or Claude McKay's Ray (acknowledging "all of life was a problem"), might pass on to readers. In this classic *Bildungsroman*, Zora Neale Hurston discovers—within the correlation of Janie's pastoral-setting of orgasms and *angst*—amidst her "layered plot," a courageous independent woman who shows the world that "Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore." As the Yale-trained, Canadian-born, exceptional African American Studies scholar Noelle Morrisette puts it in her lectures, "*this text sings*"; yet, Hurston is much more than a blues singer; she is a poignant messenger of / for the blues. To bring yet another plausible segue to this above-mentioned fact, Hurston's words enable us to pay homage to the tunes being sung in that era of America whereby Hurston's *newly* vernacular voice vented itself out of slavery's abated past and brought with it a new tune striving for liberty and responsibility. Thus, this is Janie Crawford's story. Janie's

survival offers her grace, if not, also, glory. Indeed, this is what her journey encompasses in Their Eyes Were Watching God. From the environ within this novel's daily challenge—which is so vividly captured juxtaposed to the frames of its traumatic post-colonial birthright following the aftermath of slavery itself—readers cannot avoid that conundrum of existence in which the “American Negro” created / creates the blues.

If one simply placed two of her works, MOSES Man of The Mountain and Their Eyes Were Watching God side by side, they can sense how willingly Hurston possesses a biblical and philosophical acumen so rare for someone but only a generation removed from the intellectual and cultural restraints of slavery. Hurston brings Janie's thoughts to the literary forefront and makes her a sensual siren that is but this stellar camouflage who disguises *that* physiological decree representing Hurston's biblical and philosophical genius: “All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshipped. *Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion*” (Hurston 145). How more philosophical astute could a writer out of The Harlem Renaissance be? Here, in that last sentence alone that I have left intentionally in italics, in such an inexplicably profoundly retrospective passage as such, must I conclude, with absolute confidence, just how wrong Wright and Kaplan are about this novel's depth and its importance to that core of voices, *as well as orgasms*, representing American and World Literature.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone [de]. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 2000. Print.
- DuBois W. E. B, David W. Blight, and Robert Gooding-Williams. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Random House, Inc., vol. 1. 1978. Print.
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis.. "Why the Mule Bone Debate Goes On." *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Gloria L. Cronin. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990. Print.
- "Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings: How It Feels to be Colored Me." New York: Library of America, 1995. Print.
- MOSES Man of the Mountain*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1939. Print.
- Kaplan, Carla. "'The Oldest Human Longing': The Erotics of Talk in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2007. Print.
- Miles, Diana. *Women, Violence, & Testimony in the works of Zora Neale Hurston*: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2003. Print.
- Schuyler, George S. "The Negro-Art Hokum." *The Viking Portable Library: Harlem Renaissance Reader*. Ed. David Levering Lewis. New York: Penguin Books, 1994. 96-99. Print.
- Walker, Alice. "Afterword: Looking for Zora." *Ms. Magazine* September 1973. Print.
- "Everyday Use." *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Chester J. Fontenot Jr., Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Patricia Liggins Hill (eds). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997. 2005-2010. Print.
- Wall, Cheryl A. "Histories and Heresies Engendering the Harlem Renaissance." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*. Wesleyan UP, 2001. vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 59-76. Print.
- Wright, Richard. "Between Laughter and Tears." *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Gloria L Cronin. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998. Print.